

Merkel, Charles US Army

[00:00:16.31] CHARLES MERKEL: My parents met at Fort Benning, Georgia. And my father was in the Army. He had gone in for a year, and then Pearl Harbor happened. So he was in for the duration. And Mom was a junior hostess at Fort Benning, at the service club there. My father was part of the 10th Armored Division, Patton's unit.

[00:00:39.14] And he used to go in there, with all the Soldiers, and he would ask to borrow the typewriter. And my sister and I found out, years later, he didn't know how to type. But that was his way of getting to know Mom long before she was Mom.

[00:00:56.84] And they had a three day pass, went to Panama City by bus, had three days, and came back. And then he finished his training and went overseas. And I was born 10 days after he left.

[00:01:08.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Was there a wedding in there somewhere?

[00:01:11.25] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, I think, there probably was a wedding in there. In fact, their 35th wedding anniversary brought them back to Fort Benning. And they went to the service club. And mom was really disappointed to see all the weeds around it, and that sort of-- Sand Hill. And since then, they've torn the building down there.

[00:01:28.88] But that was where I was born, as I said, 10 days after he left on the 19th of September 1944. And so I was well over a year old before he even saw me.

[00:01:45.58] JOE GALLOWAY: When and where were you born?

[00:01:48.88] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, I was born on the 19th of September 1944. And Mom was on the train to Connecticut. And so, we made it as far as Connecticut.

[00:02:02.16] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were born there.

[00:02:03.42] CHARLES MERKEL: Yes.

[00:02:04.11] JOE GALLOWAY: What do you consider your hometown?

[00:02:06.33] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, right now, I've lived in Florida longer than I've ever lived any place else. And so, I consider Florida my home, with the military background, I moved around so much, that this is just definitely home.

[00:02:23.31] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you gain a commission in the Army?

[00:02:26.88] CHARLES MERKEL: I gained a commission in the Army over in Vietnam. I was commissioned in Vietnam.

[00:02:32.28] JOE GALLOWAY: A battlefield commission?

[00:02:33.75] CHARLES MERKEL: Yes it was.

[00:02:34.77] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't do many of those.

[00:02:39.15] CHARLES MERKEL: I don't know how many they did. But I was commissioned in 1969--

[00:02:45.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Rare as chicken's teeth.

[00:02:49.02] CHARLES MERKEL: General Barnes was the one who literally pinned on my bars. And it was a lifelong dream of mine to be an Army officer.

[00:03:06.71] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you enter the Army-- draft or enlist?

[00:03:10.55] CHARLES MERKEL: No. I entered the Army, and went to flight school. And then graduated from flight school in 1968 as a warrant officer.

[00:03:24.48] JOE GALLOWAY: OK.

[00:03:25.22] CHARLES MERKEL: And then went to Vietnam, and then was commissioned--

[00:03:28.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Commissioned up from there, a warrant officer.

[00:03:30.47] CHARLES MERKEL: And let me think. Go back 50 years. I think, it was May of 1969. But don't hold me to that.

[00:03:40.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. All right. So you enlisted in the Army to do helicopter pilot training.

[00:03:49.46] CHARLES MERKEL: Yes. Well, I had been a cadet at PMC, as you know. And I was a student there in ROTC. And then got mononucleosis. And so I missed, literally, a whole semester of school. And then, I had the opportunity to go in the military, which I did. And then finish my education later on.

[00:04:15.82] For a while I was a student. I was part of the fire department there. And so I would spend weekends in the firehouse. And with an ambulance, we'd go pick up patients, and that sort of thing.

[00:04:29.91] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of the Vietnam War before you entered the military?

[00:04:36.08] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, I entered the military in 1967. And so I was well aware of the fact that there was a Vietnam War. And as you and I discussed earlier, I had a dear friend, Richie Testa, who had been in the 1st Cav, and was killed. And it was a result of your book, that I realized that he was in the Ia Drang Valley fight. And I did not know that.

[00:05:02.58] Also, Jack Geoghegan was the brigade commander in 1963, just before I entered. And he's truly a legend in the school. And I knew he was killed, as well, in 1965. And that put a real damper on activities within the campus-- his death. It really hit the school hard, and also, the cadets who knew him as a cadet.

[00:05:33.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me about the helicopter pilot training. You start off in Texas?

[00:05:40.20] CHARLES MERKEL: I did. You've probably heard this before, Fort Walters, Texas. One of the bravest men I ever knew, was a gentleman who took me out on my first helicopter ride. And his name was Mr. Perry. I never forgot him. And he took me to a football field size area. And he was going to teach me to hover. And I took every square inch of that field trying to hover. And he didn't take control of the aircraft readily, he let me struggle with it for a while.

[00:06:17.03] And then finally, about maybe 12 hours, 13 hours, somewhere in there, we were at a stage field. And he got out, and took a sandbag and put it in the seat to simulate his weight. And he said, you got it. And so I picked--

[00:06:35.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Soloed at 12 hours?

[00:06:38.10] CHARLES MERKEL: About that. Again, I'm dust and cobwebs off after a long time. But the other thing that was interesting, was I did my traffic pattern, called the tower, told them what I wanted to do, and came back down and landed. And I said-- called the tower and I said, well, that was great fun. Is it OK if I do that again. They said, knock yourself out. Those were their words.

[00:07:02.75] And so, I took off again and did another pattern, and then went over and picked up my instructor. And he said, I was wondering if you were going to come pick me up again. And that night, they threw me in the pool, which was a rite of passage.

[00:07:14.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. What were they teaching you to fly in at that point?

[00:07:21.20] CHARLES MERKEL: There were three types of aircraft. There were TH, which is training helicopter. I won't try to explain all the acronyms. There were 55s, there were Hiller 23s, and there were the H-13. And I was learning to fly on the H-13, which is--

[00:07:39.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Little bubble jobby.

[00:07:40.55] CHARLES MERKEL: Exactly. The same one, if you've ever seen a episode of MASH, the very beginning of the show, they show the H-13. But if you fast forward-- that would have been 1967 when I was doing that. Fast forward to 1972, I believe, I was stationed at Fort Monmouth. And we had the last three H-13s in the Army inventory.

[00:08:11.02] And we had to take them from Fort Monmouth-- Lakehurst Naval Air Station to Davis-Monthan in Arizona. And it took us five days.

[00:08:22.68] JOE GALLOWAY: You could have walked there quicker.

[00:08:24.48] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, not to digress too badly, but you only had an hour and a half of fuel. And you better have it on the ground in an hour and a half. They get the little puddle jumpers. But going across Texas, as you know, there's a lot of open space. And the truckers were able to go faster than I was. But I could pick up a little bit. And I saw that the road curved a little bit, so I was able to go cross-country. And I had, at least, one trucker shaking his fist at me that that was cheating.

[00:08:52.20] There, that's when I discovered there's a Merkel, Texas.

[00:08:55.74] JOE GALLOWAY: There is a Merkel, Texas. When you finish that wide spot in the road in Texas, they sent you to Mother Rucker.

[00:09:08.10] CHARLES MERKEL: That's correct. I went to Mother Rucker, and went through instrument training at Mother Rucker.

[00:09:13.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Flying now the Huey?

[00:09:15.45] CHARLES MERKEL: No, the H-13.

[00:09:16.50] JOE GALLOWAY: H-13 still.

[00:09:18.24] CHARLES MERKEL: H-13s. They had the H-13s that were outfitted with a hood. And I had a tendency to really hold on to controls very tightly. And so, I made a little sign, and I pasted on a cockpit, and it said, relax, stupid. And so, I was much more relaxed after that.

[00:09:41.10] And I got through the instrument training. Then they introduced us to the Cadillac - the Huey. And I fell in love. It was just a wonderful aircraft.

[00:09:50.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Superb aircraft.

[00:09:51.75] CHARLES MERKEL: It did things it was never intended to do.

[00:09:57.71] JOE GALLOWAY: How was your flight training in the Huey?

[00:10:01.16] CHARLES MERKEL: Enjoyable. Because at that particular time, we had gone through our primary training. We'd gone through instrument training. And then it was learning to fly tactics, and that sort of thing. All of our instructors were Vietnam veterans, so they could come back, and they could explain to us some of the dos and don'ts for the aircraft, and survivability.

[00:10:28.97] One of the maneuvers we had to do, for example, was a figure eight landing, which meant, you came over the landing zone, and then you circle back, and you come back over the landing zone a second time, and then circle back, and then you land. And we had to master that to be proficient in that particular maneuver.

[00:10:49.91] And he said, that's the last time you'll ever see that. You'll never do that again.

[00:10:52.88] JOE GALLOWAY: You'll never do it.

[00:10:53.66] CHARLES MERKEL: And I never have. It was just a requirement. And we learned how to do that. And that's not how we flew in Vietnam.

[00:11:01.88] JOE GALLOWAY: No. Did the training that you received prepare you for what you faced when you got to Vietnam?

[00:11:17.67] CHARLES MERKEL: Yes and no. We had a requirement. We had to have 210 hours at a time. I had my whopping 212 flight hours in aircraft when I went to Vietnam.

[00:11:36.08] I was in Vietnam-- graduated in late August of 1968. And then less than two weeks later, I was in Vietnam-- or about two weeks later, I was in Vietnam. And so I had 10 days leave, three days travel.

[00:11:55.33] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you go over? And where did you land?

[00:11:58.66] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, we flew cross-country to California, and then--

[00:12:05.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Commercial?

[00:12:06.83] CHARLES MERKEL: Commercial. And then because I was over on the East Coast. And so they took us to California, and I flew with a classmate of mine. And so I had some company going over there. But in Oakland, when we got there, we were all on our own. And we flew-- it was contracted. It was contracted--

[00:12:30.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Civilian charter.

[00:12:31.80] CHARLES MERKEL: Civilian charter.

[00:12:32.75] JOE GALLOWAY: World Airways or one of those.

[00:12:34.87] CHARLES MERKEL: However, one of the interesting things that I observed was when we stopped in the Philippines, and we swapped out the female-- stewardess at that the time, flight attendants now-- for male. They would not allow the women to go into the country, so they swapped it out for male. And we made the rest of the trip with male flight attendants there.

[00:13:01.53] I got there at night. And it was pitch dark.

[00:13:05.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Saigon?

[00:13:06.84] CHARLES MERKEL: No, it was Tan Son Nhut. But one of the things I observed was the fact that it was absolutely pitch dark. And you know how, in the United States, you can see farm houses, and lights, and that sort of thing. And all I saw were circles of light. And I

couldn't figure out what they were. And of course, very quickly, I found out what they were. They were American compounds. And they had the generators lighting them. But most of the country was pitch dark.

[00:13:35.23] JOE GALLOWAY: True, true. Did you have a prearranged assignment? Or did you have to go through the Repo Depot?

[00:13:45.29] CHARLES MERKEL: I had orders to the 12th Aviation Company as part of the 1st Aviation Brigade.

[00:13:52.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Located where?

[00:13:53.93] CHARLES MERKEL: I don't recall because I never joined that unit.

[00:13:58.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, you didn't.

[00:13:59.69] CHARLES MERKEL: No. My orders were after I was there for, I think it was two days, maybe. And I received new orders. And I said, well, what about these? And he said, oh, we revoked those earlier. And I was going to be assigned to Casper Platoon or the 173rd Airborne Brigade. And that turned out to be just a marvelous fluke, and a great opportunity.

[00:14:29.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, explain for us what the Casper Platoon is.

[00:14:33.32] CHARLES MERKEL: Casper Platoon is the only platoon in Vietnam that was assigned to a brigade, specifically, to support that unit. At that particular time, there were maybe, 100 people in it total, 20 pilots, and about 80 crew chiefs and gunners.

[00:14:59.30] And we only had 14 aircraft. We had eight Hueys and we had six Loaches-- the OH-6 Light Observation Helicopter. And that was it. And our responsibility was to provide any support that the brigade needed.

[00:15:14.00] JOE GALLOWAY: So you were locked to that brigade.

[00:15:17.00] CHARLES MERKEL: Oh, yes. Yes.

[00:15:18.14] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't loan you out very often.

[00:15:20.18] CHARLES MERKEL: They didn't loan me out at all.

[00:15:21.71] JOE GALLOWAY: At all.

[00:15:22.34] CHARLES MERKEL: They were very possessive of their aircraft and their pilots and their crew chiefs. And we would support-- we had four battalions. And we would do whatever was necessary to support it.

[00:15:35.36] JOE GALLOWAY: You're flying supplies to them. You're pulling wounded out.

[00:15:39.92] CHARLES MERKEL: Anything that was needed. We were command and control, we were direct combat support, we were medevac, we were Snoopy, we were--

[00:15:50.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Everything.

[00:15:51.56] CHARLES MERKEL: We even dropped Agent Orange. We had an aircraft fitted out with the facilities to drop Agent Orange. Our headquarters, though, was in-- our support, for the rear, was in An Khe. And that's a place that's very familiar to you, with Hon Cong Mountain there.

[00:16:15.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:16:16.01] CHARLES MERKEL: And that was where our administrative support was.

[00:16:20.15] JOE GALLOWAY: This was after the Cav or before?

[00:16:23.09] CHARLES MERKEL: No, this is after the Cav. The Cav had departed. The fact that the Cav patch was still up on Hon Cong Mountain when I got there. Go figure, right? And so I flew via C-130 from Tan Son Nhut to An Khe. And then from An Khe, I was picked up by a Casper pilot, Bill Thompson.

[00:16:46.16] I remember him very well. We called him gramps because he was like 35, and a W3. And then he took me to Bong Son, LZ English. And this, I know the Cav--

[00:16:59.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Back down on the coast.

[00:17:00.47] CHARLES MERKEL: That's right. I know the Cav had a pretty bad fight up there as well.

[00:17:05.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Sure did.

[00:17:06.32] CHARLES MERKEL: After the Ia Drang Valley, I know that-- in fact, the hooches we had--

[00:17:11.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Hal Moore fought that fight too.

[00:17:13.25] CHARLES MERKEL: Is that right?

[00:17:13.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:17:14.18] CHARLES MERKEL: I did not realize that.

[00:17:15.65] JOE GALLOWAY: That was his brigade.

[00:17:17.78] CHARLES MERKEL: OK.

[00:17:18.14] JOE GALLOWAY: We stopped there on our last tour.

[00:17:23.24] CHARLES MERKEL: You'll have to tell me about that after the cameras stop rolling.

[00:17:26.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:17:27.41] CHARLES MERKEL: I'd love to hear that. Initially, that's where I was. We had an area called Ghost Town, which was where Casper was. And we had the revetments there. And we had sufficient revetments for our 14 aircraft.

[00:17:44.30] But we also had support elements, like the Lucky Star 61st Aviation Company had aircraft over on the west side in an area called the Crap Table. And that will become significant later on. And that was kind of like a U-shaped blacktop area. And they had their revetments up there in that. But that was a support element, not part of the 173rd.

[00:18:08.75] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. What were you flying at this point?

[00:18:11.63] CHARLES MERKEL: I was flying a Huey.

[00:18:13.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Huey Slick?

[00:18:14.99] CHARLES MERKEL: We only had Slicks. The 61st Aviation Company did have C model gunships, so that we had that support available if we needed it. But again, we're organic to the brigade. So we were subject to whatever we had.

[00:18:34.76] JOE GALLOWAY: You were all the lift they had, yeah.

[00:18:36.53] CHARLES MERKEL: That's right. And one of the things I wanted to mention was my first flight in Vietnam, because it was with a pilot by the name of Roger Schuster. And Roger Schuster just passed away within the last year. But he was the commanding general's pilot. And so Marty Heck, who was the other pilot, was on leave. And they decided to give me my orientation flight in the CG's aircraft, with the CG in the back.

[00:19:06.98] So there, he's pointing out different things like, stay 1,500 feet or above or get low level. But that distance in between is a kill zone. And he's pointing out different areas that were hot areas, stay away from that set of hills.

[00:19:26.33] And then his voice came in the headphones and said, we've two guys showed up. He said, I'm trying to listen to the ball game on AFBN. And it was General Allen. And that was my welcome to Vietnam. But prior to that flight, Casper had a little initiation ceremony that they would give all new pilots when they were put on a schedule. And that involved getting us our chicken plate and helmets and weapons, and just all sorts of equipment.

[00:19:59.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Hanging everything on.

[00:20:00.39] CHARLES MERKEL: Everything on us. And it's all-- I'm going out to my first-- and I'm listening to all this stuff because I thought--

[00:20:08.10] JOE GALLOWAY: You're waddling out there.

[00:20:09.12] CHARLES MERKEL: I'm waddling out there. And then I can hear this laughter. And I looked up, and it was the guys up on top of the hooch roof. And they were all sitting up there, and they're just laughing their heads off at this newbie who was going out there.

[00:20:23.07] JOE GALLOWAY: The newbie is going out with all his gear.

[00:20:25.71] CHARLES MERKEL: Well I could hardly wait till the next newbie came in. Because I wanted to be up on that roof and watch them get initiated in there.

[00:20:40.28] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions, like food, quarters?

[00:20:44.99] CHARLES MERKEL: Initially, we had-- of course, you were at Bong Son, so you know LZ English, what facilities were there. There were plywood hooches with tin roofs on them, some screening if you were lucky. We had blivets.

[00:21:11.70] We would have a water truck come around, and each unit had a big blivet for water. It was about 40 gallons, maybe. And every three days, that would be filled up. And so you had to ration, be careful of the water supply because of the fact that it was a premium item.

[00:21:31.85] And that also involved timing your showers because at night, when it cooled down, it was cold water. And if you waited till noon to take a shower, it was super hot water because of the sun. So you had to get that right timing there.

[00:21:51.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Get that right timing in.

[00:21:52.25] CHARLES MERKEL: And figure out when the water-- So the living conditions were fine. I had a cot. And initially, when I-- in that area, where Ghost Town was, we wanted to set up a really classy shower. We started building one, and unfortunately, it caught fire. And the concern was that it was going to burn down LZ English. It was huge fire, but we were able to put it out.

[00:22:26.66] Some people were counseled after that about being careful with not pyrotechnics, but be careful with fire. So it was good. And then our support element at LZ English was with the 2nd Battalion, the 2nd Bat. So if we needed a mess hall, we'd go over and eat with the 2nd Bat because there's so few of us there. And from 1965 until 1971, there were approximately 300 members of the unit. That's it.

[00:23:00.60] JOE GALLOWAY: What responsibilities consume most of your time at that time?

[00:23:06.75] CHARLES MERKEL: At that time, we would check to see if our names were on the flight schedule, to fly a mission, and who we were flying with. We weren't assigned to a

particular aircraft. We were assigned to missions. And up to the luck of the draw, whatever, was out at maintenance

[00:23:23.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Whatever bird you got.

[00:23:23.31] CHARLES MERKEL: Whatever bird was out of their maintenance, we would get that aircraft.

[00:23:28.20] And then we'd get together with the crew chief and the gunner, and go over the mission and determine what we had to do in order to support that mission. And that was the Hueys. The Loaches were completely different. We had what was called Mini-Cav. And the Loaches, there were six of them. And they would fly in pairs with a minigun, a gunner/crew chief, and one pilot.

[00:23:56.31] And one would fly low over the jungle, try to draw fire. The other guy is high behind him. And if they drew fire, he'd peel off, and the other guy would come in, and suppress the fire. And then they'd swap. So it wasn't fair to have one guy get shot at all the time.

[00:24:12.27] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't have Cobras to follow on?

[00:24:14.72] CHARLES MERKEL: No, we didn't have Cobras. We had C model gunships. We didn't have Cobras during that period.

[00:24:20.98] JOE GALLOWAY: So you were sending out two Loaches.

[00:24:23.19] CHARLES MERKEL: Yes.

[00:24:24.18] JOE GALLOWAY: One high, one low.

[00:24:25.71] CHARLES MERKEL: Yes. They call it Mini-Cav missions. And they-- "Inferno." And I don't know why they call it Inferno, but that was the call sign.

[00:24:37.11] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your favorite helicopter to pilot?

[00:24:41.32] CHARLES MERKEL: The UH-1. The UH-1, for sure.

[00:24:47.43] JOE GALLOWAY: The Huey.

[00:24:48.18] CHARLES MERKEL: The Huey. When I got back from Phu Hiep, that two months I was down there, then I was reassigned. We had a new commanding general. And I was reassigned to fly General Barnes, who was our new brigade commander at the time. And so, I remained General Barnes's pilot during that period of time.

[00:25:13.62] At that point, we did have a fixed aircraft. It was Casper 571, which did not survive the war there.

[00:25:23.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Could you give us examples of some of the things the Huey helicopter did that it wasn't designed to do?

[00:25:31.17] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, for example, it was mentioned earlier-- for example, it was never designed to go into a confined area and cut trees, all right, but it did. And it depended on the size of the tree. We were very careful about the size of the tree. But when you have your crew chief and the gunner leaning out, watching the tail rotor, you're being very careful, and it's a confined area. But if you don't do that, you can't fulfill the mission.

[00:26:04.83] And that's one of the examples. The other example would be with the power on the aircraft, when it would get to the red line, you're supposed to stop. But if you're delivering supplies and you're delivering, in the case I'm thinking about is water blivets as a sling load, if you drop them, the blivet's going to break. But if you get it down there, the troops are going to get water.

[00:26:32.83] So those kinds of things there. Does that help?

[00:26:36.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:26:38.56] CHARLES MERKEL: A little bit. It was never designed to do those sorts of things, but it was a beautiful aircraft. And the sound is something I'll never forget.

[00:26:50.03] JOE GALLOWAY: If applicable, what did you do for recreation off-duty time, if you had any?

[00:26:57.21] CHARLES MERKEL: I did, because if we weren't on the flight schedule, we had some time off. So I looked around and tried to determine what I can do to help. And I adopted a Buddhist orphanage at that time, with the kid. I went downtown., and--

[00:27:16.27] In fact, the very first time we went down to Bong Son. My driver was a Spec 4 by the name of Dennis D'Andrea And do you recall the SP packs? The sundry packs?

[00:27:28.96] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:27:29.32] CHARLES MERKEL: OK. Sundry packs, as you know, that's-- this is for 15 people in the field. And they have razor blades and razors and candy and, at that time, cigarettes and matches, and all sorts of things for this long range patrol. And they also had a thing called a gorilla bar. Do you remember those candy bars?

[00:27:51.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:27:51.88] CHARLES MERKEL: The gorilla bars? Everybody hated them. And I never quite understood why they had a little white powder on them. And they were tossing them out. I said, let me have them. So I started stockpiling gorilla bars. And so D'Andrea and I are heading down to Bong Son, and it's just dirt road.

[00:28:11.47] And I saw these kids on the side of the road. And I said, D'Andrea, stop the Jeep. I want to give these kids some candy. And he looked at me and said, sir, I don't think that's a good idea. And I said, come on, D'Andrea, there's a couple of kids there, I want to give them candy bars. Sir, I don't think that was a good idea. I said, D'Andrea, just stop the Jeep. And so, OK.

[00:28:31.39] They stopped the Jeep, and I got out. And these kids are looking at this American. Why is he approaching us? And they realized, hey wait a minute, he's got something in his hand, and it's candy. And I don't know how the word went out. But there were probably, I don't know, could have been 40 or 50 kids emerge from everywhere.

[00:28:55.91] And I thought, well, this isn't too smart because one of them could have a grenade. And so I took the candy bars that I had. I think, they were in a box, as I recall. And I threw it as far as I could, and they chased the candy. And I got in the Jeep and sped off, D'Andrea sped off. He didn't say a word, just looked at me and smiled. And he knew. He said, OK. So I never did that again.

[00:29:18.71] But what we would do is toss the candy out to the kids as we were moving, as the vehicle was moving. And it got to the point where some of them were tossing them back because they didn't like them either. I don't know what it was about those candy bars.

[00:29:32.29] But anyway, back to your specific question was I wanted to do something to help the kids, especially the orphans. It's a third world country, and they had nothing at that time. The hooches were a mud, straw, a little hay. And that was a village. And that's where we were.

[00:29:55.67] And so I was corresponding. I'd write back to church groups, civic groups, anybody who would listen to me. And they said, what can we send you? I said, send me notebooks, pencils, anything that will help these kids-- clothing.

[00:30:14.50] And so I would take boxes of stuff down to the orphanage-- this Buddhist orphanage, and give them to the kids, which is, of course, a violation of the protocol in Vietnam. I'm supposed to go through the elders, but they tolerated it because I was their source. And then I felt like that was something productive that I could do to help the kids.

[00:30:45.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell us about the orphanages that you spent time at with as a volunteer.

[00:30:52.02] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, one of them, as I mentioned, was this Buddhist orphanage that was down toward the Bong Son River. And then I was assigned for a couple of months down to Phu Hiep to support the 4th Battalion. And it was one aircraft and a crew. And I spent two months down there supporting them near Tuy Hoa.

[00:31:19.41] And then when I went back up to Bong Son, and when I got to Bong Son, there was another orphanage outside the gate. There was a Protestant orphanage, so we adopted that one as well. And the kids, for example, it's very hard to describe in the United States because we have plentiful supply of a lot of things.

[00:31:43.00] But you absolutely know what I'm talking about with the fact that, for example, our artillery rounds came in wooden boxes. They were burning of the wood. I said, that doesn't make sense. Let's take the wood. Let me disassemble the boxes, and we'll give the wood to the orphanage, and they can build beds for the kids.

[00:32:04.15] And so that's what we did. We were building beds for the kids with a little compartment for whatever personal things they had there. And I've got some neat pictures of that, when we were doing that. And that was a productive use of the wood, I felt.

[00:32:21.54] So those are the kinds of things. If I got toys, if I got anything, I would--

[00:32:27.06] JOE GALLOWAY: You were getting care packages from home, and donating that stuff.

[00:32:31.01] CHARLES MERKEL: Exactly. People were very generous in the United States. I could not have done it without those supplies. But anything I got, I would take them down there, and I distributed to the kids-- marbles, simple things. Anything they could get.

[00:32:52.03] Being an airborne unit, it was unique because as you know, everybody had to volunteer to go airborne. And so you had very, very highly motivated individuals. And when I first got there, of course, we are pilots, so I had not been through jump school. And everybody is saying, all the way, sir, all the way with a salute. And I thought, what's this all the way stuff? And I'm supposed to stay airborne, but I was a leg. OK.

[00:33:24.01] But that was the greeting. But it's really, really hard to jump out of-- to be airborne without an aircraft. So they needed us. And the 173rd was the only unit that had a combat jump in Vietnam. And that was prior to my arrival.

[00:33:45.49] So to answer your specific question, our missions changed on a daily basis. One day, we may be supplying water to sling load water up to a unit. Another one, we might be bringing ammunition in. We were also subject to going on combat assaults if we had to go into a hot LZ. That sort of thing. So it really varied with the mission.

[00:34:14.86] And I'm going to bring it up a little bit later, but one of the individuals that I have great respect for is a fellow named, J Ross Franklin. And I don't know if you're familiar with him or his name. He was the deputy brigade commander when I was there.

[00:34:31.30] And his call sign was Speedster. And the reason that his call sign was Speedster was because Casper taught him how to fly the aircraft. Because it would be just the two of them in the aircraft. And if something happened to the pilot, they wanted him to be able to get it back on the ground in one piece. And he loved that.

[00:34:52.13] And then later on, he went through the gentleman's course at Fort Rucker, and got certified. And-- how to fly, he loved doing it. And so he was a certified Army pilot as a result of all that.

[00:35:07.63] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, you're at this time a warrant officer 1?

[00:35:11.14] CHARLES MERKEL: Initially, yes. Until about six, seven months after I got there, when I got commissioned, I think.

[00:35:21.23] JOE GALLOWAY: They have to twist your arm to get you to go regular Army and lieutenant?

[00:35:26.87] CHARLES MERKEL: Oh no. Absolutely not.

[00:35:28.10] JOE GALLOWAY: You were ready for it.

[00:35:31.44] CHARLES MERKEL: As a child, I wasn't very good at planning. In other words, all I wanted to do with my life was go to West Point, get commissioned, stay in the Army. And I had no concept of life after the Army. I had none. Some people have great plans, but I did not.

[00:35:52.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe the quality of the leadership in your unit? As high as you could see, and as low as you could go.

[00:36:01.58] CHARLES MERKEL: OK. The brigade commander was a one star. And his name was John W. Barnes. And as I said, I was assigned to be his pilot. His call sign was Skyhawk. And I brought a photograph of him that he inscribed for me when we were in Vietnam. May I read his inscription?

[00:36:22.27] CREW: Absolutely.

[00:36:23.19] CHARLES MERKEL: OK. It's, "To Lieutenant Charles E. Merkel Jr., with fond memories of the many hours we flew together, best wishes always, John W. Barnes, Brigadier General, United States Army, Skyhawk." And he was a marvelous individual. He was always good to me.

[00:36:44.73] And when we would fly a mission, he would not say, this is what we have to do. He'd come out and say, this is what I'd like to do, can we do it? And 99 times out of 100, we'd give them a thumbs up. And only once or twice, maybe, that I said, that's kind of pushing the envelope a little bit. It was like I have to be concerned about his safety as well. That sort of thing.

[00:37:10.89] And then J Ross Franklin was great to work with. And General Barnes and I, by the way, remained friends-- lifelong friends, until his death in 2007. And I would visit him at his home. And he was the one who promoted me to captain. Very cordial to my family, my parents, when I was there, getting promoted in the Pentagon.

[00:37:37.38] And then J Ross Franklin eventually settled in a place called Pensacola. And so we would see each other fairly often. And I was the only one from the 173rd that was at his funeral when he passed away. But we enjoyed that relationship.

[00:37:57.33] And J Ross Franklin, to answer your specific question, would get in the aircraft, and he would get on the radio and talk to the tactical operations center, the TOC. And he'd say, which way to the war? And that's where he wanted to go.

[00:38:14.28] And he was teased one time because he wanted to take ice cream to the field, which he wound up doing. But his philosophy was, if I can deliver ice cream, the enemy is going to know that we can deliver bullets. So that was his philosophy.

[00:38:31.91] And I can't leave the topic of leadership without talking about Jack Nicholson, who was the 2nd Battalion commander at the time. And he was an extraordinary individual. And he would lead by example.

[00:38:52.76] And one instance, for example, we were over in the coast. And they were trying to have an amphibious landing. And the LST was having trouble getting in because of the rocks there. And he had us land. He stripped off, went out into the water, right up to his chin, and he said, come on, if I can do it, you come in here. He's trying to motivate the guys. So he said, we can do this. And he was never able to persuade them, but he was very good about being able to--

[00:39:23.90] JOE GALLOWAY: Were these Vietnamese he's trying to persuade or--

[00:39:26.48] CHARLES MERKEL: No. These are Sailors. Sorry, the Sailors-- to come in, and bring this LST in by the shore, and doing an amphibious assault to this village.

[00:39:39.83] JOE GALLOWAY: He couldn't get them.

[00:39:40.79] CHARLES MERKEL: He couldn't get them to come in. But he did everything humanly possible to do that. And one other mission, again, to answer your specific question-- Thanksgiving 1968, I'll never forget it. Because we were flying missions all day long, Marmite cans. Every Soldier got the ration of turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, all that stuff.

[00:40:10.82] We were flying all day and we probably had-- it was easily 14, 15 hours of flying all day. We'd hot refuel, so we can get-- he wanted to make sure every Soldier got--

[00:40:21.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you ever get to eat any turkey?

[00:40:24.97] CHARLES MERKEL: That's what I'm coming to. So we finally got in there. We shut down the aircraft. He looked and he said, wait a minute, you guys haven't had your Thanksgiving. You've been out delivering it to all the troops in the battalion. And so they had some scraps and stuff left, but it sure tasted good after a day.

[00:40:44.09] But that's the kind of leadership. He retired as a one star, again. And fast forward to 2009, 40 years later, and I deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan, and who's the RC South commander who's on his way out, but RC South commander was Brigadier General Mick Nicholson, his son.

[00:41:16.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:41:17.27] CHARLES MERKEL: And so I had the opportunity to serve with both the father and the son in a combat zone. And then he went on later on to get four stars, as you probably know. And I called Jack. I said, Jack, now that he has four stars, does that mean you have to salute him? And I won't tell you his answer.

[00:41:35.90] So that's the leadership that I saw in Vietnam. Our platoon leader was a captain, by the name of Stan Streicher. And he was the commander for two years. And Stan-- I'm trying to think how to phrase it, but Stan had a very unique leadership style.

[00:42:03.59] Some of it was intimidation, but he also was fearless in flying missions. And there were times where he would take an aircraft up solo to perform a mission that he thought was too dangerous the rest of the unit there.

[00:42:20.48] And again, fast forward, we're at a reunion in Nashville, Tennessee. We're sitting around at a steakhouse and we're all on a table. And Stan was off in the corner, and he was in tears. And I walked over to him.

[00:42:37.52] I said, what's the matter, Stan? What's going on? And he said, I didn't do right by you guys because he did not submit people for awards. He said, there should have been more Distinguished Flying Crosses, there should have been more Bronze Stars, there should have been this, and there should have been that.

[00:42:51.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Shoulda, woulda, coulda, but ain't.

[00:42:53.87] CHARLES MERKEL: Ain't. But that was-- Stan did not put people in for a lot of awards. But then we're sitting at this table, and he's across from me. And Diane looked at me, my wife, and she said, one of the things I realized that all of you have real affection for one another. Well, it was only 100 of us at any one time. So you can develop a very close relationship there.

[00:43:18.92] And Stan looked over, and he said, and you know what, he said, I'm still pissed off at you. And I looked at him and said, Stan, what in the world could I have done 40 years ago that upset you so much that you're carrying a grudge for all these years?

[00:43:34.49] Because when we flew in missions, he said, when I was flying with you, I got shot at more times than I got shot at with other pilots. And I said, did it ever occur to you, maybe they were shooting at you, and not me? And he said, no, I never thought about that. And I said, well, maybe, I should be upset with you, instead of you being upset with me.

[00:43:54.11] So anyway, those are the kinds of things that-- does that help with the leadership?

[00:43:58.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:43:59.01] CHARLES MERKEL: I mean, I was blessed by great leadership.

[00:44:03.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, did you do two tours?

[00:44:05.45] CHARLES MERKEL: I had an extension.

[00:44:09.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Your leadership didn't change though.

[00:44:11.45] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, yes, it did.

[00:44:12.46] JOE GALLOWAY: It did.

[00:44:13.06] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, we had General Barnes. I was flying for General Barnes. General Barnes went home. In fact, I took him down to Cam Ranh Bay to drop him off. He deserved a little Cadillac tour down there.

[00:44:31.04] And then General Cunningham came in and he took over. And I was his aircraft commander.

[00:44:36.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Change in leadership style?

[00:44:39.74] CHARLES MERKEL: Yes. From the extent of General Barnes, when he would monitor a mission, he liked to see the whole battlefield from 1,500 feet, so he could-- he could direct the troops. We were out of the range of small arms and he could do that.

[00:45:00.07] General Cunningham like to be like the second ship or third ship into an LZ, so-- hot or otherwise. So it was just completely-- he wanted to be on the ground, and he wanted to be with the troops.

[00:45:14.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Barnes wanted to be up above with the God's eye view.

[00:45:18.67] CHARLES MERKEL: That's right. Two different leadership styles. But I mean, that was dangerous for General Cunningham because if the commanding general gets shot, I had no choice. I had to do what he told me to do. And in fact, his wife thanked us later on. She said, I know it hadn't been easy with him because she knew her husband, and knew what he wanted to do. And she thanked us for getting him home safely. He went back to Fort Bragg.

[00:45:52.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, back home, the antiwar movement's in high gear, and racial tensions, social tension, all kinds of stuff going on. Did any of that translate over to where you were?

[00:46:10.42] CHARLES MERKEL: As you've heard over and over again, we were so busy just trying to accomplish a mission, and to stay ahead of the power curve, that I really wasn't aware, if you will, of what was going on back in the States. I was very focused on what I was trying to do there, and trying to perform the mission, and be a good Soldier, if you will.

[00:46:36.91] JOE GALLOWAY: So social tensions and racial turmoil did not come over to the 173rd?

[00:46:43.14] CHARLES MERKEL: No. When in combat, as you're well aware, you're fighting for the person on your left and your right. And it's very focused. I hate to sound cliché, but we did not have that. And we never treated anybody any differently. Everybody was treated the same.

[00:47:05.26] And I'm not saying that-- there may have been problems below the surface, but not that I was aware of, and never on a mission. We were all business when we were out flying our missions.

[00:47:24.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe significant actions or operations that you participated in?

[00:47:35.38] CHARLES MERKEL: Because of the nature of our mission, we participated in some significant battles, but not the type that would be reflected in, for example, the Ia Drang Valley, where we're going in on a lift ships, and that sort of thing. The An Lao Valley is an example.

[00:48:01.63] The An Lao Valley was off west of us. And it was a free flyer zone. It belonged to them, not us. And so we had a clear field of flyer at that point, that sort of thing. But our responsibility was not in major missions. It was more of a support role for the brigade, if that makes sense.

[00:48:25.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:48:25.63] CHARLES MERKEL: And so we didn't have significant actions, but we would support units. We would support company size units, for example. We didn't have a lot of battalion size unit when I was there.

[00:48:42.61] Prior to my getting there, there was some pretty significant battles that took place. And there was the Tet of '68 that took place. But there was also a Tet of '69 that most people don't get, don't remember or are not aware of. And the brigade got hit pretty heavy.

[00:49:05.17] And so we spent the day, getting General Barnes around to different areas to check to the troops to see how much significant actions there were, how many killed we had, how many wounded, and that sort of thing.

[00:49:24.31] Then in March of 1969, we, An Khe and English both got hit heavily. So it's not like we were on significant actions or battles, but we were supporting the brigade.

[00:49:49.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Could you describe any cutting edge technology, science, medical advancements that you witnessed or saw employed in Vietnam?

[00:50:02.97] CHARLES MERKEL: That's a double-edged sword because I just finished with the 53rd wing. And the 53rd wing was involved with a lot of technology in Vietnam. But from our viewpoint, we didn't have access to a lot of different things as far as technologically is concerned.

[00:50:30.28] I mean, one of the biggest breakthroughs that we had was discovering that we could take a C-Ration in can, and put it on the M6, the machine guns. So that the belt will go across smoothly. Because with the wind you're going, then as you know, it'd break the belt. This way, it had a smooth way of entering--

[00:50:54.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Advancing, yeah.

[00:50:55.78] CHARLES MERKEL: Advancing.

[00:51:00.84] The best day I had in Vietnam-- how about one of? OK, one of the best days was I mentioned the Protestant orphanage I'd go to. And it was-- I would bring toys and things to the children, and drop them off. And I noticed there was one little girl on a bench.

[00:51:25.95] The other kids would come in. They know who I was. And they said, hey, this is the toy guy or the whatever. Whatever I had, they knew they were going to get something. And sometimes, we just played marbles. And I love the happy sounds of the kids. Because it's not their fault that they're living in a war zone.

[00:51:48.06] But I noticed one little girl was off to the side. And it turned out that her father had been killed by the Viet Cong. And her mother had been brutally raped and killed. And she was a witness to that. And so one of the happiest days was the time that I got a little doll. And it's one of these when you move it, it goes mama kind of thing.

[00:52:16.47] And I gave this to her, and she burst into tears. And it was great because it was an emotional breakthrough. And she came over. And whenever I'd go there, from then on, she'd come over and sit in my lap. And so I would always hold-- Now, it's starting again. But I would always hold out something for her to make sure she got something there.

[00:52:42.34] And at one point, I really wanted to adopt her, to bring her back. And it had been one of the cadets who was two years ahead of me in school, Richie Taos, who literally needed a congressional law passed in order to permit him to adopt a child. And so I was never able to do it.

[00:53:07.42] One of the worst times was when I had to explain to her that I needed to go home, and I couldn't take her with me. That was one of the worst times.

[00:53:22.49] This is the reason I'm here, because my wife said I need to tell this story. I mentioned to you that on the 20th of March 1969, An Khe and English got mortared. And when I was down in Phu Hiep, we had a crew, one aircraft. So we got very close as a crew. We were down there for two months.

[00:53:53.85] Larry D. Smith was the crew chief, Dennis D'Andrea was the gunner, Bob Nelson was one of the other pilots. And then gramps, I mentioned him earlier, Bill Thompson, was also a pilot on down there. They'd pair off.

[00:54:12.83] When we came back to Bong Son after being gone a couple of months, on the 20th, Larry D. Smith was-- yeah, and Smitty was what we called him-- a nickname. And when he was out-processing at An Khe, we had the little phone with the two little D cell batteries in the crank on the thing. And my phone was ringing.

[00:54:41.69] And it was Bob Nelson from over in An Khe, letting me know that they had satchel charges set off, and that Smitty had been killed out out-processing. He was within a week of leaving. And a nice guy from Georgia, just the nicest person on the planet.

[00:55:03.01] And I'm in my cot in the hooch. And I'm angry. And I'm just furious that this guy survives his tour in Vietnam, and he's literally out-processing, and the satchel charge, blew out the door. And he got a piece of wood through his chest, but that wasn't killed him.

[00:55:31.78] What killed him was that when they grabbed their weapons, and got to the door, then they got stitched with an AK-47. And he still was wounded there. But then he succumbed from his wounds there.

[00:55:47.86] And so I'm in my cot, and I'm just, as I said, I was furious. Emotionally, I was just not-- it wasn't pleasant. But I heard pop, pop. And the pop, pop was the mortar rounds being dropped in-- into the tube at Bong Son, at LZ English.

[00:56:14.08] And I yelled to Jim Revoir said, incoming. And I rolled on the floor. And with that, my wall blew out. And I was lying in that cot. And so Smitty was looking after me anyway. Because had I not gotten that phone call, I possibly would not have been awake. And I wouldn't have gotten that opportunity to roll on the floor.

[00:56:38.63] What really upset me was the fact that I had my brand new khakis hanging up there with all my stuff, and they were shredded. And so we went out to hit the bunker. We went out the door. Jim and I went out the door. And Gary Irwin was our crew chief. And he was front- - excuse me, he was gunner, out and to my right, heading toward the bunker.

[00:57:03.94] And then they hit us again. And so we got mortared again. Because that wasn't in the rules. The rules where they fire a couple and that would be it. But they broke the rule. They fired again. And they caught us in the open. And Gary Irwin was injured substantially.

[00:57:29.23] Jim Revoir was injured in his hand. I got peppered on my left side because Gary was to my right, and in front of me. And then Jim Revoir-- excuse me, Doug Haviland, our aviation officer got hit in the stomach with shrapnel. And it literally knocked us down.

[00:57:50.02] And I'm laying there, and I could hear the water going, and the acid smell of gunpowder, that kind of thing. And what I was hearing though, and this was obviously, in the middle of the night. What I was hearing was our water blivet.

[00:58:10.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Your blivet had been blown up.

[00:58:11.17] CHARLES MERKEL: Our 40 gallons-- our precious water was going up. But not only that it do that. It flattened all five tires on the Jeep that we had. And so we grabbed a cot. And we're carrying Gary down to B-med. And that's the medical facility.

[00:58:33.70] I remember, Lauren Little was the doctor on duty at that time. And it was pitch dark, we go down this embankment with Gary on-- because he's in rough shape. And there was a light bulb with the circle of light there. And we got into it. And I yelled for somebody to help us because we need a medic. This man is hurt. And he said, he's not the only one.

[00:59:01.21] And up to that moment, I didn't know that I was hit. I had no clue. And so I was bloody on my left side there. But again, there wasn't serious injuries, not compared to Gary. Gary was evacuated to Japan.

[00:59:23.29] I talked to him a number of years later. And he's passed away since then. But I told him, I said, it's always made me feel bad that you got hurt so badly. And he said, it was the luck of the draw. He said, you easily could have been in front of me, kind of thing. But I just felt very bad.

[00:59:40.36] There is a postscript to this because we had to sign forms when we went over to Vietnam. If you're hospitalized, 30 days or less, do you want your family notified? And heck no, my mother's upset as it is with me overseas.

[01:00:03.55] So anyway, I'm writing letters, the sky is blue, the grass is green, and that sort of thing. And then I get back to my unit after being patched up. And General Barnes called me over, and said, go over to see the CG. I said, OK. So I reported in to him, and he said, go to the MARS station and call your mother.

[01:00:28.56] I looked at him and said, sir? And he said, I want you to go to the MARS station and call your mother. And I said, OK. So I got it all arranged. The MARS station is where you have all of the amateur radio operators. And they all have their microphones, and everybody's supposed to say, over. And they'll release it or key the mic, depending on what's going on.

[01:00:55.58] So I went over there, and I got hold of my mother. And I found out what had happened. Somebody sent the Purple Heart certificate home. And Mom knew enough about the Army to know what a Purple Heart certificate stood for. And so, she called the congressman, the senator, the White House, the secretary of the Army. And she reacted as a mom. She wanted to know what's going on here. So poor General Barnes is getting all these congressional-- with me.

[01:01:29.34] And I'm not telling them anything because I didn't want them to worry. But that was all for naught because she knew anyway, but unknown to me.

[01:01:41.09] And when I got home, as I know that's one of the questions later. When I got home, first words out of my mother's mouth were not welcome home, glad to see you, give me a hug. She said, I wanted to see your wounds. That had bothered her for all that time. I said, Mom, I'm fine. It could have been a lot worse, that sort of thing.

[01:02:07.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Could have been.

[01:02:08.47] CHARLES MERKEL: So anyway, again, I'm sorry, it's a long answer to a short question.

[01:02:12.58] JOE GALLOWAY: No, no, that's alright.

[01:02:21.33] Did you have much, if any, contact with our allies-- the Koreans, the Australians.

[01:02:28.98] CHARLES MERKEL: The Koreans, when we were down at Phu Hiep, they had-- it was called Miami Beach, I think it was. It was near Tuy Hoa. There was an area on the coast that they were responsible for. And I always felt very safe in their sector, alright--

[01:02:49.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Very safe.

[01:02:50.54] CHARLES MERKEL: Very safe in their sector.

[01:02:53.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Only place you could ride in a Jeep, right through there, without any weapons. It's wide open.

[01:03:00.86] CHARLES MERKEL: Yeah. We were armed, but I felt very safe. The one thing that sticks out in my head, and this is again, dusting cobwebs off of decades of dust, is that one time, I loved their-- we had dinner with them one night. They fed us. And the only thing I couldn't handle was the soup with a fish head in it. I didn't want to insult them, but that was a bit much there.

[01:03:40.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Any other of the allies, the Aussies?

[01:03:42.17] CHARLES MERKEL: Not really. Because again, we were a separate brigade.

[01:03:46.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:03:47.06] CHARLES MERKEL: And so we were pretty much autonomous. And we did the darn thing. We had very little.

[01:03:58.28] JOE GALLOWAY: How much, if any, interaction did you have with the Vietnamese people-- military, civilian?

[01:04:04.76] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, a lot. I was downtown a lot with the orphanages I was working with. And we had some ARVN units that we were doing. And we also had Montagnards that we would go out and support the Special Forces unit that had Montagnards.

[01:04:27.82] And in fact, Souranery was the name of the captain. Why I remember that, I don't know. But he's the one who talked me into getting an Asahi Pentax Spotmatic camera there. And I had three in my lifetime, two were stolen.

[01:04:44.08] So we had that interaction with the Vietnamese people. And I'm a very curious guy as far as people are concerned. And I brought back a few things. I brought back one of the baskets that they had at the time they were making it. It was green. And I brought back one of the brooms. And I had one of the hats. Those were all over the-- they couldn't believe that I was willing to pay them for these items there.

[01:05:10.40] And I forget what I gave them. I gave them \$1 or something, and they just thought this was-- they were in tall clover. But I still have all those items. So I did have some interaction with the Vietnamese.

[01:05:32.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Your contact with your family back home was mostly letters?

[01:05:37.27] CHARLES MERKEL: Yes. It was absolutely, primarily letters with the exception of one MARS call, that I was ordered to make back home to Mom.

[01:05:53.08] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you get from home about the war you're fighting, about the troubles that are going on back there, and the antiwar movement, and all of that-- Stars and Stripes, Armed Forces Radio?

[01:06:09.40] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, we had Stars and Stripes. My mother would clip columns and clippings, and things like that, mostly Charles Schulz cartoons, Peanuts. She would send stuff over to me. And every once in a while, if she saw the 173rd mentioned in an article, she'd send it to me. And I'd read about what we either had done or was supposed to have done, allegedly had done.

[01:06:39.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Allegedly--

[01:06:40.36] CHARLES MERKEL: Had done, yeah. And I thought, oh, I didn't know that. That kind of stuff. So communication was pretty standard as far as we were concerned.

[01:06:52.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Before we talk about coming home, would you like to talk about the dog you adopted named Ho Chi Minh.

[01:06:59.35] CHARLES MERKEL: I absolutely would love to talk about him.

[01:07:02.62] JOE GALLOWAY: And tell us how you got him back to the USA.

[01:07:05.92] CHARLES MERKEL: That was not an easy tale. I wasn't able to get Mi-sook back, but I was able to get Ho Chi Minh back. Ho Chi, we were down in Phu Hiep, as I mentioned, and Bob Nelson was down there with me. And we had a-- he had found a little puppy. And the puppy liked to sleep by the radios because it was warm. They had the sets, the power supplies on the floor, of course. And those were nice and warm.

[01:07:36.65] We couldn't get milk so we were raising them on beer. And he was good for about two cans tops. And then he was snockered. So as he got older, we became very-- I mean, it was a wonderful having a pet. It was wonderful having a dog around.

[01:07:58.48] But then our unit, we were going to move. We realized we were going to turn Phu Hiep back to the Vietnamese. And I can't leave Phu Hiep without talking about Ed Johnson for a minute, just for the record.

[01:08:13.84] Ed Johnson, member of the class of '66 at West Point. And Ed and I became very close at Phu Hiep. And we went out to the rifle range one time. And our first round, Ho Chi took off. And I thought, I'm never going to find my dog again because we have all these hooches that look exactly the same. And we were a ways away because we were at the range to fire our weapons.

[01:08:44.23] And after about two hours, he comes in, tail wagging, just like, hey, here I am, kind of thing. And Ed Johnson then, subsequent to that was out in the field and stepped on a mine and lost his leg from the knee down. And we are still good friends.

[01:09:09.10] Say, I saw him last year, and he has not allowed that to slow him down at all. He would take a Harley and drive it cross country from California to Washington. But he's just a delightful person and a good friend. And he's one who shows that just because you lose a leg, doesn't mean you can't do anything.

[01:09:32.77] Back to Ho Chi, when we were leaving Phu Hiep, I said, we're not going to leave him, so I brought him back with us. And as the general's crew, we had a hooch that was in the center of this Crap Table that I mentioned earlier. It looks like U. And our aircraft was up on the Crap Table to be close to the TOC, and where the general needed it. If he needed to go someplace in a hurry, we were available to go and take care of him.

[01:10:07.02] And Ho Chi settled in very nicely at Bong Son and LZ English. The cooks loved him. They'd give him bacon scraps. And he ate very well. And he had a black tongue, which confused me a little bit. And on the way back from Phu Hiep to Bong Son, I stopped by Qui Nhon because that was the only vet that was around.

[01:10:31.53] And I said, why does he have a black tongue? And this vet started. I said, I'm only used to pink tongues on dogs. And he said, oh, because I think that his father was a German Shepherd, one of the scout dogs, and his mother was a Chow. And Chows have curly tail and black tongues. And I said, oh--

[01:10:47.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Yellow yard dog with a black tongue.

[01:10:50.73] CHARLES MERKEL: Exactly.

[01:10:51.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Going to bite you in the leg.

[01:10:53.31] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, not me. I always felt very safe around him. But we brought him back to Bong Son, and he lived in our hooch. He would-- he went on some missions with us. And he at one point, got captured and we got him back.

[01:11:15.01] I could just write a story after story about Ho Chi, and everybody loved him. And one night-- he would always sleep either at the floor or by my feet, on my cot. And one night, though, he was up. And he was agitated, running around. And he was scratching at the door. So I went over and opened the door to see what was bothering him. And he took off at full speed up the Crap Table there.

[01:11:52.20] And I couldn't see because it was very dark. But somebody shot at me. And it turned out that that was a number of sappers who had gotten through the wire. Ho Chi smelled them, warned us. And we did sustain damage. They blew up at least one aircraft, as I recall, and a couple of buildings. But he was our hero at that point.

[01:12:21.58] So I came to the end of my tour. And I said, I'm not going to leave him. And it was a one blood test he had to take. And if he passed it, he could come home. If not, he had to remain in Vietnam. He passed the blood test.

[01:12:38.29] So the only place I could ship him was Saigon. And so we flew down to--

[01:12:48.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Long Binh?

[01:12:49.40] CHARLES MERKEL: No, not Long Binh.

[01:12:51.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Bien Hoa.

[01:12:51.79] CHARLES MERKEL: No. II Corps, the Air Force base. Oh, isn't that awful.

[01:12:58.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Camp Holloway?

[01:13:00.64] CHARLES MERKEL: No, that's a little too far west.

[01:13:02.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Phan Thiet?

[01:13:02.80] CHARLES MERKEL: No. The one south of An Khe, the Air Force base there.

[01:13:09.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Cam Ranh.

[01:13:10.63] CHARLES MERKEL: No, that's too far south. Excuse me, Phu Cat. So they wouldn't allow me on the C-130 to go down to Saigon. But the scheduler took pity on me, so they listed us as a scout dog and handler.

[01:13:31.00] And so I got down to Saigon, Ray Payer was a warrant officer. I had already coordinated with him. I'd met him in-processing at Tan Son Nhut. And we went over to the airport. And Ho Chi had-- he got dipped to get rid of parasites. They had a huge pill that they shoved down his throat, and they put him in this cage.

[01:13:53.36] And so he was dripping wet in his cage looking at me like, what did I do? It's the first time in his life he'd been in a cage. And I tried to explain to him, but not too well, that it was for his own good, that it was going to be OK. But anyway, I was able to ship him back.

[01:14:12.97] But then I get back to Bong Son. I got extended another month.

[01:14:17.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Who's getting the dog.

[01:14:19.00] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, that was my concern. What's happening to my puppy? So when I got home, I found out that the airline had sent him over to the SPCA, and he was there. And I walked over, and the poor guy wasn't eating. He was depressed.

[01:14:39.14] He came over, and I said, come here, buddy. And he came over to the cage, sniffed my hand. Little tail said, all right, I recognize-- I know who that is. And I let him out of the cage. He was never caged again. So then we had a great life there. And he was very, very faithful, very, very faithful to me. And so that's how I got him back. It was a task, but it was a task well worth doing it.

[01:15:09.86] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do after the war, after your tour in Vietnam?

[01:15:14.16] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, I had a commitment because of flight school-- the Army. I had always assumed the Army would be a career anyway. So I was assigned to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. That was the Signal Center and School at that time.

[01:15:36.36] And so I was initially assigned as an executive officer. I was branched infantry, that was before aviation was a branch. And after about two months at Fort Monmouth, the commandant of the Signal School came to me and all of the positions that were command positions were infantry officers. The post commander was, the deputy post commander-- for whatever reason, they were infantry officers.

[01:16:05.82] And so Colonel Whistler called me in his office, and said, I want you to be the ceremonial unit commander. And he said to me, can you do a saber drill? I said, oh, yes, sir. I sure can. He said, I want you to do-- be my commander for the ceremonial unit.

[01:16:24.30] The ceremonial unit is a 100% volunteer. And so I said, well, sir, I'm really happy doing what I'm doing with the XO at the company. He looked at me, and said, well, Lieutenant-- he looked at his watch. He said, it's almost lunchtime. He said, let's go to lunch, And meet me back in my office after lunch, and I'm sure you have the right answer by then.

[01:16:49.39] So I went back, and Colonel Whistler said, what did you decide? I said, oh, sir, I'd love to do the ceremonial unit kind of thing. He said, I'll tell you what I do. He said, if you do it for a year-- he said, if you still want to do something else, let me know, and I'll move you over.

[01:17:05.71] So I walked over to-- went over the ceremonial unit, and I'll never forget, Sergeant First Class Mitchell was the NCOIC. And I walked in, and he was from Kentucky. And he had

been in Vietnam as well. And I said, Sergeant Mitchell, I'm a lieutenant. You are an E-7 in the United States Army. You have at least 15 years of service.

[01:17:29.38] He said, that's roger. I said, well, when you need me, let me know. He smiled, looked at me, and said, we're going to get along fine. And so that was my concept of NCOs. Let them handle it.

[01:17:41.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Let them handle it.

[01:17:42.59] CHARLES MERKEL: Let them handle it. And Sergeant Mitchell, though, wanted out as well. So Sergeant Mitchell volunteered to go back to Vietnam to get out of the ceremonial unit. After a year, I went to see Colonel Whistler. I said, hey, sir, do you remember-- ? I said, you told me that after a year, you'll assign me someplace else. He came over and patted my shoulder, and said, you're doing a fine job. That was as far as that got.

[01:18:11.41] And so one of my classmates called me from the Hexagon. That was a research and development area. And he said, we're doing some military potential testing over here for the engineers. They would come up with concepts and ideas, and hang it on an airframe. He said, we need a test pilot. And I said, I'm there. I'm in there.

[01:18:31.57] And so Colonel Richards called Colonel Whistler, and said, he wanted me. And Colonel Whistler wasn't real happy with me, but that's how I became a test pilot doing that. So that's what I did when I came back. And then I had orders to Korea after I had finished that time with the Hexagon group.

[01:18:58.81] Colonel Price, who was a deputy post commander-- I had orders to Korea. And I flew down to Fort Rucker, my last flight, flew back to Lakehurst. Colonel Price called me in his office. And he said, I've just fired the headquarters company commander. And you're going to take command of headquarters company.

[01:19:19.48] And I said, what about my orders to Korea? And he said, I've already coordinated with infantry branch. You're going to take command. So I did. And I had 800 troops. And it was just a great job. But the reason I wanted to mention that during the interview is because of the 800 troops, 300 with known drug addicts.

[01:19:41.90] The Army had an exemption program during that time, where you could go to your commander, if you were in Vietnam, and say, I'm on drugs, and I want to get off drugs. And they would send you back to a unit closest to your home.

[01:19:56.93] And they would think that that would enable them to have support from the families, and that sort of thing. It really put them closer to the source. So every Wednesday, I had the buses outside lined up in front of the company area, and all 300 would go down to a hospital for a urinalysis.

[01:20:16.01] And of the 300, I can confidently say, there are five who were off drugs. I didn't have 295 failures. I had five successes that I know of.

[01:20:29.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:20:30.08] CHARLES MERKEL: But I became an expert in military justice. I absolutely did, because as you know, they would try to get funds and money and do all sorts of things. And I would be out walking Ho Chi. And in the fence would be the works, the cooker and the syringe, and all that stuff right in the hedge there, hidden in the hedge in a plastic bag.

[01:20:57.64] JOE GALLOWAY: That was what year? '70--

[01:21:01.18] CHARLES MERKEL: '72.

[01:21:03.34] JOE GALLOWAY: I think the year of our Lord, 1972, when the Army was at its absolute lowest level.

[01:21:12.07] CHARLES MERKEL: And there were a lot of problems. That's why the predecessor had gotten relieved because it was a different kind of environment. Colonel Price came over one time. We had the supply room, a mess hall, and all that sort of thing.

[01:21:28.82] And the Soldiers would go into the mess hall, and they were dapping. Do you remember that?

[01:21:33.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah. They could do it for 30 minutes.

[01:21:37.27] CHARLES MERKEL: And he said to me-- he's standing there, and they're all dapping. And he said, why don't you stop that? I said, why? I said, they want cold food. It's their time. This is their time to eat. He said, doesn't that bother you? No, sir. It doesn't bother me at all. I said, if that's what they want to do, they can have it. That sort of thing.

[01:22:02.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe for the illiterati what dapping is.

[01:22:07.57] CHARLES MERKEL: Dapping was how the black Soldiers would greet one another. Each soldier had his own way of doing it. They had a system of greeting. And it may have been elbows--

[01:22:28.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh yeah, elbows. They could do it for 30 minutes.

[01:22:31.48] CHARLES MERKEL: Exactly. And there was a whole ritual. Sergeant Green was one of-- the first sergeant. I was blessed with great NCOs. And Sergeant Green had been in the Korean War, and he had been in Vietnam. And he was black, alright. And he came to me-- and Soldiers said, well, you're given more Article 15s to the black Soldiers than you are to the white Soldiers. And I said, well, maybe I am, but I've never thought about it that way.

[01:23:05.32] And remember, I've got 300 drug addicts. And so I went to Sergeant Green. I said, Sergeant Green, how about doing a check to see, racially, how we're doing here. And he came back, and he said, oh, yeah, you're definitely biased.

[01:23:19.48] I said, I am? He said, yes. You're giving far more Article 15s to the white Soldiers than the black Soldiers. I went back to him, and I said, well, let me correct that for you. No, no, it's OK. You don't have to correct that. That sort of thing. But it was an interesting time.

[01:23:36.34] JOE GALLOWAY: It was that.

[01:23:38.14] CHARLES MERKEL: I had one Soldier die in my arms from a heroin overdose. And that broke my heart.

[01:23:44.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Do you have trouble readjusting to life after combat?

[01:23:51.31] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, as you heard this morning, I say, no, my wife says, yes. I guess I have a couple of idiosyncrasies that-- for example, if I'm in a restaurant, I cannot stand to sit with my back to the door. I just can't do that. It's just a quirk of mine.

[01:24:23.02] As far as continuing or having any kind of PTSD, and they didn't call it that at that time, I would say, no, probably, not. But I think your next question is, how did the Vietnam change me. Is that on the list?

[01:24:45.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:24:46.01] CHARLES MERKEL: All right. Well, I asked my parents about that. And they said that when I came back, I came back much more serious. I mean, I have a sense of humor. It's ingrained in our family. But for example, I was never a good student. I was never a Jack Geoghegan as a cadet.

[01:25:09.05] But when I came back, I had a thirst for an education. And I wanted to finish up, and I did. I finished, and I graduated summa cum laude with two Baccalaureates. Then I went on. I got assigned to Fort Rucker, went to school at night, finished an MS degree, then went to Valley Forge when I was assigned to Pennsylvania.

[01:25:33.29] I enrolled in a PhD program there. But then got PCS orders before I could leave. So I got an MA in history. And then when I got back into Florida, I got a PhD in history in Florida State University. So I had two Baccalaureates, two masters, and a PhD. But that was all a result of Vietnam. I attribute that to Vietnam, to maturing.

[01:26:05.73] JOE GALLOWAY: What do you think that war meant to you and your generation?

[01:26:10.33] CHARLES MERKEL: And that is a very difficult question to answer because I was raised in an environment of duty, honor, country. My parents were of the World War II generation. And that was instilled in me, and I wanted to go to the Academy and get commissioned, and that sort of thing.

[01:26:31.51] I was told that they wanted me to go to Vietnam, I went to Vietnam. I tried to make life a little bit better for some of the Vietnamese people while I was there, within my

sphere of influence. And the way I justify the sense of loss I feel at the young lady I had to leave there, this little girl, is that her life was better during the time I was there. That was the best I could do.

[01:27:03.68] So how is Vietnam viewed by our generation? It's a mixed bag. Because there are some people who went to Canada, who are feeling guilt now, as you know. But again, fast forward 40 years for a moment, and I had the opportunity to be deployed to Afghanistan, to Kandahar.

[01:27:34.34] And I think I'm one of the few who can say, I was mortared in Vietnam and rocketed in Afghanistan. But when I came home from Afghanistan, we landed in Baltimore. And we were walking along as a group. And we had to turn the corner in order to get to the terminal area. And I could hear all the shouting and yelling and stuff. And I thought, what the heck is that?

[01:28:02.30] And we turned the corner, and it was people who were holding signs-- welcome home, cheering us, flags, that sort of thing. And who was it? The Vietnam veterans. And I said, OK, am I supposed to be on that side or am I supposed to be on this side?

[01:28:22.47] And when I realized, I wasn't 18 anymore. I had to go through all the combat skills training. And it's been a long time since I crawled under barbed wire with an M16. And doing it 40 years later is not the same as you do initially. So it's a mixed bag right now.

[01:28:49.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you visited the Wall?

[01:28:52.67] CHARLES MERKEL: That's another interesting question because I consciously stayed away from the Wall. It was a conscious decision. And I at one point was a professor of military science in an ROTC detachment at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania.

[01:29:09.95] And one of our instructors who was a retired Marine Corps colonel passed away. I represented the detachment at the funeral. And I had our Army van to drive down there. And so I drove down and I envisioned it was going to be a one day trip down and back. And I had nothing with me, not even a toothbrush. I was just going to go down and going to attend a funeral and head back.

[01:29:41.15] I attended the funeral. And when I left Arlington, the van broke. And so I called maintenance, the facility there. And they couldn't get to it until the next day. And they weren't even sure if they're going to be able to fix it at that point. They said, depends on what parts, and all that stuff.

[01:30:06.68] But I had my roommate from Vietnam, Bob Feinan, who was with the Secret Service. He had gotten out of the service. And so I called Bob, and I said, I need a place to crash overnight. And I did. Literally, all I had was my uniform that I was wearing.

[01:30:26.30] So I stayed with Bob. The next day, I was wandering around and I stumbled on the Wall. I didn't realize it was there. So OK. So I walked over to it, and I had this fellow come up to me with an old field jacket.

[01:30:48.26] And he stood a rigid position of attention, and gave me one of the sharpest salutes I've ever had. And I returned it. And he said, sir, may I help you? And on this, I said, you don't have to Sir me. You're not on active duty. Oh, yes, sir. I do.

[01:31:04.46] And so he helped me to locate some names on it. Smitty, being one of them. And do the rubbings. And it was amazing. Because all of a sudden, whatever I needed, it materialized. A ladder, and I'm up there, doing a rubbing. And these people are taking photographs of me doing the rubbing. And I'm thinking, why they taking-- ? This is kind of a private time.

[01:31:31.49] And one of the most emotional pictures and powerful pictures I've seen-- if you know the painting where the person is touching the Wall. And I saw that, and that stopped me in my tracks. And my wife got one for me, and had it framed. And that was in my office behind my desk there.

[01:31:54.39] So again, the direct answer to your question is, I have visited the Wall. And later on, with my Casper guys, we had a reunion in Washington. And we put a wreath by the Wall. And then last year, with the class of '66, we put a wreath on the Wall. And I represented the Jack Ferra family.

[01:32:18.14] So I have been to the Wall several times. But I consciously had avoided it for a very, very long time.

[01:32:29.62] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard about the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration. You're part of it today. What do you think of that?

[01:32:38.46] CHARLES MERKEL: Well, I think that's a great privilege and an honor. And I thank all three of you for what you've done. We're a cooperating partner. The West Point Society of Northwest Florida is a cooperating partner. The 53rd Wing is a cooperating partner. And Casper Platoon is also a cooperating partner. So we've literally given out hundreds of pins over the time there.

[01:33:04.38] But I know you're through with your part, but I'd like to add a couple of things.

[01:33:09.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Sure.

[01:33:09.30] CHARLES MERKEL: If I may.

[01:33:09.90] JOE GALLOWAY: Go right ahead.

[01:33:10.92] CHARLES MERKEL: With Casper, as I mentioned earlier, it was about 300 total from 1965 until 1971. Of the 300, there were 54 Purple Hearts awarded, and there were 11

killed. So for a percentage, that's a pretty fair percentage. I'm sorry that one of the Purple Hearts was mine, but it was. But I wanted to mention that.

[01:33:37.87] And I also wanted to mention-- you remember AFVN? Did you ever hear of Chris Noel?

[01:33:44.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh yeah.

[01:33:45.48] CHARLES MERKEL: Alright. "A Date with Chris."

[01:33:46.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Still get an email from her now and then.

[01:33:51.72] CHARLES MERKEL: She was my guest in Orlando when we had the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association. I finally had a date with Chris. And it was 2003. And I was so sick that weekend, that by the time I got back, I couldn't really enjoy it.

[01:34:07.44] But by the time I got back, I was with my wife. I'd gone to bed. And literally, you could hear the fluid splashing in my lungs. And so I said, I probably need to go to the ER. And I went over there. And they admitted me with pneumonia and several other things that I picked up. He said, I don't know how you drove back from Orlando. I said, I had to stop about every 30 minutes in order to get back.

[01:34:37.38] Fast forward, seven years, and it's 2010. And we're going to have a welcome home Vietnam ceremony here in Fort Walton Beach, sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. And I decided it would be a good thing to have Chris come up from South Florida, and leave Bettsville and come up and be part of it. So we did.

[01:35:00.28] I bought her a ticket, and she came up. She stayed in your guesthouse. In my wildest dreams, I never anticipated I would have Chris Noel all to myself, and I did. And she rode in that Jeep that I have right now. But I wanted to mention Chris Noel because she did a lot, as you know, for the troops.

[01:35:24.13] When I came back from Vietnam, remember, we could get 50% off of the airline fares if you travel in uniform, so I did. And when I came back, my welcome was I was walking past the UN building, and I had people yelling obscenities at me. Not at me, but at the uniform I was wearing.

[01:35:46.12] And one of the people that was a great mentor to me was Lawrence A. Frost, who was one of the great Custer scholars. And he was a former mayor of Monroe, Michigan, which was Custer's adopted home. I had the opportunity to visit him because I could get 50% off the airline fares.

[01:36:10.15] And we're walking through Monroe, Michigan, Custer's boyhood home. And people were yelling obscenities at me. And poor Larry Frost was horrified that they would disgrace the uniform of the country like that. And so it's a generational kind of thing. So I wanted to add that just in the what it's worth type department.

[01:36:37.54] And two things I wanted when I got back-- delicious apples and Slim Jims. And I haven't gotten my fill of either. So thank you. Thank you one and all.

[01:36:48.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you. Appreciate it, Charles.